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The Holocaust As I Remember It

I was born in 1929. When I was six years old, my family moved to a very small village called New Luchko in Carpathia, part of Czechoslovakia. When Germany occupied Czechoslovakia in 1940, Carpathia was given as a prize to Hungary, which received it and proceeded to carry out policies dictated by the Germans. In addition to my family there was only one other Jewish family in the town. The village was populated by Ruthinians, mostly poor farmers, most of them very anti-Semitic.

As I was growing up, the anti-Semitism was mild in comparison with what was to follow. Still, as a young child in grammar school, I was constantly reminded that I was a Jew. I was pushed around and was called not by my name, but by "Jew". My teacher's name was Meyerchick. He fit right in with the anti-Semites. I was to meet his brother later in high school.

When the Hungarian government came to power, the voices and insults became much more vocal. When I went to Hebrew School, I had to walk to the next town, Large Luchko. It took approximately one hour to get there, and en route I was constantly on the lookout for the village boys. When I spotted them I would hide in a cornfield or in the bushes. If caught, I would be harassed and punched, and my books would be torn.

My parents had a general store and sold items the farmers could not produce themselves, such as sugar, salt, farm tools and liquor. They used a barter system for payment. At the end of the harvest we would be paid in wheat or corn, which we then shipped to the market in Munkacz. With the new policy from Hungary, we became "open game". Many of the customers took advantage of us. Some did not pay at all. Others brought in much less than the agreed amount of wheat or corn. This made it very difficult for my parents to make ends meet.

One day, when I was about 12 years old, I was told that my uncle (my father's brother Samuel), who lived in a town called Ordow, had invited me to stay with his family. They lived in Carpathia, but a good distance from

my home. They had a good grammar school as well as a Hebrew school, and would be happy to have me live with them. I didn't want to leave home, but my family convinced me it would be better for me. For one year I was homesick and cried myself to sleep every night. Only many years later did I learn (from my uncle Ed Harris) that I was sent away because it would be "one less mouth to feed" for my family.

Upon returning home, shortly before my Bar Mitzvah, the Hungarians issued a new regulation: Jews were no longer permitted to own a business. So arrangements were made with a Nazi sympathizer who lived in Larger Luchko for him to take our home and store in return for his house. I never entered our home again. My parents, my older brothers Bumi and Albert, my older sister Olga, my younger sister Feige and I moved into this very small house that contained an entry room with a baking oven and another room where we ate and slept.

My brothers left to work in Munkacz as apprentices in exchange for room and board plus pocket money. My father took a job teaching in the village Hebrew School, for which he received a small salary. My sister Olga had finished high school and my younger sister Feige was still in grammar school. (I was in high school, but by mid-1943 Jewish children were no longer allowed to attend high school. So then I went back to finish my last year in grammar school, which I had originally skipped over. My cousin Olga was in the same predicament, since we were the same age.) Since my father's salary was so small, my mother ventured into an illegal business with the help of the rest of us to feed the family.

In the village, certain food items, particularly sugar, were rationed. Each family received a certain amount of coupons each month. The grocery accumulated them and returned them to the Village Hall. The official in charge was supposed to destroy them, but instead he sold them to my mother. She, in turn, bought sugar at the controlled price, transported it to Muncacz and sold it at black market prices. This was extremely dangerous and if caught, it meant an automatic prison sentence. We moved the black market sugar in several ways. Sometimes it was put into milk cans and placed on a wagon that was going to the city with milk deliveries. The wagons were spot checked by the gendarmes. If discovered, the driver would feign

innocence. The sugar would be confiscated, the driver fined. Another method to escape detection, (an idea I proposed), was to have a false bottom in the wagon and to place flat bags of sugar between the boards.

My mother also bought cocoa from various groceries and, adding sugar, made candy to be sold to stores in local villages, We all helped to wrap the candy, and it was my job to make the deliveries. Dressed in peasant clothes, I walked for many miles. On one occasion I was stopped by soldiers and searched. Fortunately, it was on the return trip, so I only had the money from the sale. It was taken away from me, and I was let go with just a few good kicks. If I had been caught with the candy, my whole family would have been exposed.

Then new orders were issued. All Jews were required to wear the yellow star of David. Getting caught without it meant arrest and imprisonment. Non-Jewish males were called upon for military training once a week, their equivalent of the "Hitler Jugend". Jewish males were also required to serve one day a week, but instead of rifles we were issued shovels with which we marched through town to a designated place and dug trenches. Then we refilled them. This was supervised by a local militia unit, headed by the biggest Jew hater in town, Myerchik, my former high school teacher and the brother of my grammar school teacher. While I was in his class, he had always found excuses to punish me. He had beaten me with a heavy stick in front of the class. On these work outings, he used this same stick if we didn't dig fast enough, or only dug out half a shovel full, or didn't march properly. He was hell.

The adult Jewish males were drafted for duty and sent to various work camps. My father was gone for months at a time providing manual labor for the army. Exactly how long he served there, I can't remember.

During Passover of 1944 our entire family was together with the exception of Albert, who was working in a labor camp in Budapest. This was to be our last Seder at home, and that week, having packed only some essentials and whatever food we could carry, we reported to the Village Square. We were told that we would be taken to a ghetto in Munkacz and would stay there until the war was over. They said our homes would be patrolled and kept safe until our return. At that point we believed that they were telling us the truth,

but there was one incident that should have alerted us. One year prior to leaving home orders came from the government for all Jews not native to the area to return to their original homeland. This was the case with our neighbors, the Margolises, who had emigrated from Poland. Responding to the orders, they left for Poland, but were never heard from again.

So many times we have been asked how it was that we went so willingly. One answer is that the ghetto for the Jew was a familiar place. We actually felt we would be safer there.

Before leaving, my parents left some valuables such as photographs, silver candlesticks, and table linens with our most trusted neighbor for safekeeping. When Albert and I returned to claim these possessions after the war, our neighbor completely denied having received them.

Looking back, it seems quite a coincidence that we left during Passover week and carried only matzos. Our ancestors, the ancient Hebrews, went out of Egypt on the road to freedom with only matzos. We left our home with only matzos and went on the road to hell.

When we reached the Village Square we saw a convoy of wagons patrolled by Hungarian gendarmes and soldiers. After mounting the wagons with our few belongings, we were driven to Munkacz with a guard of soldiers alongside each wagon. Riding back and forth on a bicycle in a German uniform was Professor Myerchik, my former high school teacher, in a role not unlike the wagon master of the American West. He was grinning from ear to ear. At the end of the war, I heard he was executed by the Russians.

Our destination was not a ghetto, but an abandoned brick factory. The plant was very large, had several storage areas, and was surrounded by barbed wire. Other Jews were there from various villages in the area. How many, I don't know, but it was in the thousands. On arrival we were met for the first time by the German SS. We had heard that there were German soldiers in the area and assumed that the SS were ordinary German soldiers. None of us had any prior knowledge of either the Gestapo or the SS. At this time, they did not show their brutality. I was to encounter that later. We were told that this was only temporary - that our homes were being prepared, and that we would be moved in as soon as they were ready. We were formed into columns of four, and marched toward the plant. We crossed railroad tracks

that were once used to transport bricks and were assigned to a building where each family was given a space. There were no beds, and we slept side by side, dormitory style, using straw to lay on. We had our own blankets carried from home, and made the best of the situation. We were still together, and for that we were grateful.

We waited in line for food at a soup kitchen. It was insufficient but we still had food from home. We bartered with others, exchanging one food for another. We had to wait on long lines for the latrine and for water. More convoys arrived daily.

One day, a long cattle freight train pulled into the grounds and certain people were told to line up and board the train to be taken to their new homes in the ghettos. We watched them being loaded. The sliding doors were closed and padlocked, and German soldiers sat on the roofs of each car with rifles. Then the train moved out. This continued for days. Our family was holding up fairly well with the exception of Olga. She developed an infection on her leg. She had trouble standing on it and was in a lot of pain. Our turn came to board the train. We said our goodbyes to some relatives (Uncle Isaac and his family were not scheduled to leave with us). Other relatives on my father's side who were there included my grandfather and grandmother, and some uncles and cousins. We had been in the brick factory for approximately three weeks, and were actually looking forward to leaving and moving to where we would have more private space and where we were certain conditions would be improved. Anything would be better than where we were, we told each other, and Olga could get medical help for her leg.

The car we boarded was so crowded that only about one third of the people could lie down. We took turns sleeping. There were only a few buckets for bodily waste. We were on this train for approximately two weeks, often being sidetracked to let more important rail traffic go by. There was a war on, the guards would tell us. The train was usually at a standstill, moving mainly at night. Food, mostly soup and water, were handed through a grate twice a day.

The conditions inside the train were horrible. There was the stench from human waste and no water for washing. Small children and babies, as well as many adults, were continually crying. It was unbearable. My sister's

leg was getting worse. It was swollen and a wound had opened. Our only consolation was that it would soon end and, no matter what the destination, it would be better than this.

Finally, the train stopped. The doors opened. Greeting us were SS guards lined up with automatic rifles, shouting "Los! Los!" (meaning hurry up). This word "los" I never stopped hearing for the entire time I was confined in camp. Ahead of us was Auschwitz with large lettering above its gate, "Arbeit Macht-Frei" (Work Makes You Free). Working by the side of the tracks were details of inmates, dressed in blue and white striped jackets and pants, with a matching cap and a yellow star of David in front. At some point they mingled among us and kept whispering, "If you are less than 18 years old, say you're 18 when they ask you." We walked together toward the gate, my father and mother supporting Olga between them. She was in such pain that she could no longer touch the ground with her foot.

Once inside the gate we walked approximately 500 feet to where the SS approached us; without warning, without the chance to hug or kiss one another, we were torn apart. Women and children were sent to the right, men to the left, separated into a V-shaped column. I watched mother support Olga with another woman holding her up on the other side, and little Feige (or Feigela, as we called her) tagging behind. She was about 12 years old. Olga and mother might have possibly been saved, but with Olga's leg they didn't stand a chance. The women and children were again split with the SS telling them to go left or right. It was the last time I saw any of them.

Our line was also split and there before us pointing his crop was Joseph Mengele. My father and Bumi were directed to the left. I was asked in German, "Wie alt bis du?" (How old are you?) It sounded almost like Yiddish so I understood. I said I was "achtzen" (18). In fact I was only slightly more than 14. I have often wondered why they believed me. If perhaps I had been taller and more muscular than most 14 year olds, it would have made sense. Perhaps Mengele had sent so many before me to the right that when my turn came he just said left on a whim.

I caught up with my father and brother and waited for a larger group to assemble. We were marched off to the delousing station. After showering, our hair was cut short with about a 2" stripe shaved front to back

(the standard haircut for all prisoners of Nazi Germany), and we were issued our uniforms. We were allowed to keep our own shoes. While on the train, a man from our town, learning that everything was to be left behind, offered his extra pair of boots to me. I quickly slipped them on. I had never owned such a fine pair of boots before. (Later, in another camp, a mean-looking inmate forced me to give them to him, threatening to kill me. So, my fine boots were gone, and in their place I got the standard wooden sole-and-cloth shoes).

After dressing in our prison uniforms, we were issued numbers. Some people had them tattoed on their arms. Some did not. I don't know why my number was not tattoed on, but I will never forget it: 68.326. We were told not to forget it because we no longer would be known by name but by number. We were then assigned to a barrack (known as bloch). The three of us were still together. The bunks were crude triple decks with no mattresses. We were given two blankets each.

The person in charge, the Bloch Eltester, was an inmate himself, but not Jewish. When he blew a whistle, we all lined up, five in depth, and were given the rules:

- Achtung - we had to come to attention
- Mutzen auf - hats off
- When your number was called, you had to say "Here"
- Everyone was to be lined up evenly, front to back, side to side

The rules were immediately put into practice. Those not doing them perfectly were kicked and beaten with a heavy stick. When this was done in front of the SS the Block Eltester was more brutal and vicious to make himself look better.

Additional rules: You'd be lashed in public for not obeying orders or not moving fast enough - from five lashes up or until beaten unconscious. If caught attempting to escape, you'd be hung in front of the entire assembly. After a hanging we had to march in single file close to where the body hung. If you'd walked by too quickly and did not look closely enough, an SS holding a German Shephard let the dog loose on you and watched with joy to see how well the dog performed.

Each morning we were rushed out to the assembly field, lined up and

counted. Everyone's number was called. If someone was missing, we had to stay until they were located. They were then brought to the field, the dogs were let loose on them, and they were shot.

These rules applied to every camp I was in. If anyone chose not to live, all he had to do was not get out of bed in the morning to line up in the field.

I was in Auschwitz for about three weeks. Each day after roll call inmates were selected for various work details. Those that were not stayed in the barracks. After two weeks my father was picked for a work detail. He never returned. My father's sister Miriam was in an area next the the crematorium, where he had been sent for his work detail. They would see each other almost daily for a few months and get word to each other. I understand that the rule was that the men who worked in the crematorium were killed every three to four months and replaced with a new crew. One day he did not appear at the fence. It was Rosh Hashana, Miriam said, so we know the day he died. Miriam now lives in Brooklyn.

The first meal I got was a bowl of some kind of soup so vile it looked like vomit. It smelled so, too. I could not make myself eat it. One inmate who had been at the camp longer than me asked if he could have it. I gave it to him and he said that the next day I wouldn't give it away - and I never did. That was lunch, the main meal of the day. In the morning we had a piece of bread and coffee or tea. In the evening we had a piece of bread, coffee or tea, and a piece of salami or a similar type of food. This was the standard menu in every camp I was in.

In Auschwitz I met Uncle Isaac. He looked ill and lost, and he didn't survive. I don't know how or when he died. Later, Bumi and I were boarded onto a truck which was part of a convoy, and we were taken to Monthausen in Austria. For the remainder of my internment I spent my time in Austria.

Monthausen was an extermination camp, but unlike Auschwitz it was also a transfer camp. In Auschwitz, the buildings looked like temporary units, but Monthuasen looked like a fortress with stone and brick buildings and paved streets. While there, Bumi and I met a cousin, Ahron Shaya, the son of father's brother Beryl. He had somehow managed to get himself a job as an orderly to the commandant of the camp. How he managed this, I don't know.

He didn't dress like the rest of the prisoners but wore handsome clean clothes and looked great. He brought us some food that was unlike the prison meals, and he was able to repeat this three or four times while we were there. It was delicious.

After one week we were moved out again, this time to Ebense. This camp was only partially built so when a new shipment of prisoners arrived, they had to build their own barracks and roads. Until they were built, we slept outside with no protection from the rain or cold. The camp was located in the forest surrounded by mountains. We had to cut down trees, carry them to the site, cut them into lumber and construct the buildings. The work was extremely hard; each log had to be carried by one person. If another inmate came to help him, they were both beaten by Kapos (group leaders) who were chosen for their brutality. Most of these men were German and other nationalities, but some were Jewish.

Bumi was always a fragile person. I worked alongside him as much as I could, and helped him whenever possible. I was stronger and stood up to the punishment better than he.

The main purpose of this camp was to supply labor to dig tunnels in the mountains so that armament plants could be installed that couldn't be destroyed by bombing raids. If I thought the work I did building the barracks and roads was brutal, the work waiting for us in the tunnels was worse.

After a section of the tunnel was dynamited to loosen the rocks, we were sent in to bring out the rock. Each time we went in we were told which rock to pick up, large and small. Supervising this detail was a Kapo with a club. He never stopped smashing it into our bodies. "Los! Los!"

Of the thousands that left camp to work each day, only about half returned alive. The others died of exhaustion or were beaten to death. With the kind of food we were given it is a miracle that there were any survivors at all.

On one occasion, Bumi was unloading concrete drain pipes. While he was placing one on a pile, his middle finger became jammed between the pipes. The pain he experienced was incredible, but all I could do was to hold him and cry. When his hand was finally freed, the top joint of his middle finger was gone. I bandaged him as best as I could and they allowed him to stay

in the barracks for a few days.

After about three months a new order was given. All prisoners between the ages of 18 and 20 were to step forward. I was among about 100 men to do so. I had some reservation as to what might happen to me. But it was better than I had expected. We were assigned to a separate barrack. For the most part we were given lighter work. Three of us were chosen by the the barrack leader, a Spaniard named Lopez, to be orderlies.

Lopez had been in the camps since the Spanish Civil War and turned out to be one of the kindest people I had ever met. He did anything he could to make things easier. He took chances that if caught he himself would have been punished for. In fact, one time he received 21 lashes on his back for covering up for one of us.

As barrack orderlies the three of us kept the building clean. While the others were out, we brought the food in, sliced the bread and served it at meal time. I still saw Bumi every day after work and managed to save a piece or two of extra bread, carefully hiding it until he came by. On days when nothing was left after cutting but the crumbs, I ate them and gave him my share. But he was still working very hard and looked awful. After about a month and a half we got word that the boys in our barrack would be transferred to another camp. This time I was really worried. If they were to take us to an extermination camp, that would be the end of me.

Of those left behind was an 18 year old Italian named Moreli Saffo. One day in Italy he was in a group of people who were surrounded by the Germans. They were arrested and brought into German concentration camps. His family had no idea what happened to him; he was the only Italian among us. He learned some German and we were able to communicate with him. As a joke he was called an Italian Fascist and he kept saying, "No! I am an Italian Communist!" It was not a good idea to become friends with anyone. In the event that something should happen to him it would be another loss to endure. However, we did become close with one another and spent many hours together. I really liked him and have thought about him many times since. I wish that I could somehow locate him.

Unlike my mother and sisters being torn from me without a word and my father not returning from work, I was able to say goodbye to Bumi. He was ill and very weak, with hardly any flesh left on his bones. It was a very sad separation. I felt in my heart that this would be the last time I would see him. I tried to control myself and tried not to cry, but we both broke down. Again, I was back at Monthausen for a few days. I met my cousin Ahron Shaya, and he managed to help me with some food before I was tranferred to the Heinkel Aircraft plant near Vienna, a place known as Vienswechard.

At Vienswechard, we were trained to be helpers to the engineers and mechanics. So, this is why we had left Ebense. I believe they chose us because we were young and could be easily trained, and there would be less of a risk of sabotage. Here, living conditions were improved over the other camps I had been to.

I was assigned to a Polish engineer who was responsible for the steering mechanism on the planes. He was a decent fellow, sometimes even giving me pieces of candy. The planes we worked on were the first experimental jet fighters, or so we were told. Most of the factories had been bombed and destroyed by the allies by the time we arrived. There were only three buildings left. When the air raid sirens sounded everyone ran to a safe tunnel and returned to work when the all-clear bell was sounded.

One one occasion, we didn't have time to reach the air raid shelter, and, caught in the open, we saw the bombers overhead releasing cluster bombs which appeared to be headed diagonally towards us. It was a terrifying moment, but as it turned out the bombs fell quite a distance from us.

In another instance, when the second of the three factories was bombed, we had been standing in line for our lunch as the air raid sounded. Upon returning after the all clear, we discovered that three bombs had fallen directly on the building cutting it into three sections. That was it for our lunch that day. I remember the discussion following the air raid, and the praise we had for the ability of the American pilots to be so accurate with their aim.

Some of the civilian engineers and mechanics lived in quarters adjoining our compound. Among them was a German named Max. One day he approached me with a paper bag containing a full loaf of pumpernickle bread, something

I had not seen since my internment. He offered it to me and said that in the future he would try to get me more. Very excited, I brought the bread back to my quarters and shared it with the others. When I told them that Max, the engineer, gave it to me, they said that I should never have accepted it, that he would expect to be rewarded for it. They had to explain what they meant, because I had never before heard about homosexuals.

Sure enough, after the evening bed check was made, whispers from others reached me that Max was here, looking in all the bunks. I kept moving away from his direction, slipping under other bunks to avoid him. He finally gave up and left. The next day he approached me and told me that he had been trying to find me. I avoided answering him as to where I was.

The next four nights he was back looking for me. Luckily, there was a bombing of the plant, eliminating the third and last factory. I never saw Max again.

We began to hear heavy artillery and each day it got closer and closer. We were told to prepare to leave. Those who were ill and could not walk were told to report to the infirmary. I had to make a choice. If I went to the infirmary I was afraid I'd be shot. That's what past experience told me. I decided to leave. I later discovered I had made a big mistake. Five men had stayed in the infirmary and the next day they were freed.

The most terrible time now lay ahead of me. No matter how horrible conditions were before, nothing had prepared me for what lay ahead.

With the fronts closing in, they didn't know what to do with us so we started on what was later to be known as the death march. There was no time for the crematoriums to handle so many people, and the Nazis did not want mass graves to be discovered, so we were marched until many dropped from exhaustion or starvation. It was a last effort to eliminate the last Jew from the face of Europe.

They virtually stopped feeding us, except for occasional pieces of bread thrown to us by the guards. This bread would be just thrown into the crowd, and after desperate scrambles many people would be crushed and die as a result.

We marched from morning to night and slept in the open fields where everyone madly dug into the soil for roots, worms, slugs and snails for

nourishment. To this day my stomach turns when I see someone eat escargots.

Each column was followed by burial squads. As people fell, they were buried. Some were not even dead yet. They were just buried along the side of the road.

As time went on, fewer and fewer people were left. When we reached Monthausen, there was no room inside the camp so we camped outside for two days. I found my cousin, Ahron Shaya. He said it was was impossible for him to get me food. Now that my life was hanging on by a hair, I needed food more than ever. I waited for him, but he never appeared. I felt resentment toward him, even hate, but that was really unfair. Certainly, he was carefully watched and by this time even the Germans were short of food.

While on the march I had picked up a hat lying on the road. It was not a prison issue. It was insulated and kept the rain out. An inmate approached me and demanded the hat. I refused to give it up. We fought, but he was much stronger than I. Across the street form where my cousin stayed was a military office. An SS officer came out and demanded to know the cause of the trouble. The inmate said, "this Jew stole my hat." The officer took the hat and handed it to him and pushed me into an empty room in his building. He then put on leather gloves, and if the room was a racquet ball court, I was the ball. Each time he hit me I bounced from one wall to the other. My legs gave out and I fell to the floor where he proceeded to kick me with his boots. He then stopped, left the room, and when he returned he threw me out into the street. Many years later, my uncle Ed Harris said that my cousin watched the incident through his window and saw me go into the building. He knew what was happening and had someone call the officer. That is when the beating stopped. Unknown to me, he saved my life.

Again, the columns formed and the march resumed. This time the regular guards were replaced by old men and young German boys in ill-fitting uniforms. Among them were also Ukranians and Poles. We were marched into another camp, not typical of the ones I had been in. It reminded me of the brick factory in Munkacz. Surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers, the buildings must have been used for warehousing or another purpose in the past.

We found inmates there from different camps. The buildings were completely empty, there were no bunks or blankets. There was no food at all except the little that was thrown to us once or twice a day by a guard. At random times a guard would open a door and would throw some bread and chunks of butter into the crowd. Yes, real butter - sometimes even chocolates.

We had waited all day for this to happen, and when it did people piled on each other for the chance to grab something. When someone got a piece of food, others would bounce on him to tear the food away. On one occasion, after noticing the crowds of people running towards the warehouse, I saw two SS on a loading platform. One of them was throwing packages into the crowd and the other was holding a rifle. As I reached out to grab the package, the second SS hit me in the head with the butt of his rifle. I remember feeling very dizzy and must have passed out. How I recovered I can't remember, but I later found myself walking away.

In another instance, I got hold of a chunk of butter, perhaps two pounds or so. Quickly, I hid it under my shirt and tried to sneak away where I wouldn't be detected and could eat it by myself. But my body was so thin that the butter stood out under my shirt, and soon a group of men began to follow me. The butter was not wrapped and soon began to melt from the heat of my body. The men caught up with me and I was thrown to the ground. Dozens of hands tore at me trying to sink their fingers into the butter. My clothes in shreds, I was well buttered. I ran my fingers over my body and licked the remaining bit of butter there, which was mixed with the lice embedded on me. My stomach could not have handled the richness of the fat. If I had kept all the butter to myself and had eaten it, who knows what might have happened.

I was slowly coming apart. My hair was almost gone. My teeth, although still in my mouth, were so loose that I could press on them with my tongue and they would wobble back and forth. The lice on my body were finishing whatever was left of me.

I never knew the name of this last camp, but it was near the town of Wells, not far from Linz, Austria. While there, I met no one from my home town or anyone I had known in other camps. I did meet one young boy, also

from the Carpathian region. I can't recall his last name, but his first name was Yosel. He was 14, a year younger than me. He clung to me like I was his older brother. When we walked, he held my hand and when we slept, he held my hand. If I walked off by myself, when I returned I found him crying, "Why did you leave me?" If either of us found something to eat, we shared it. He was the sole survivor of his family so he was truly alone. So was I, although I still hoped that if I survived, maybe I would find Bumi, though the last time I saw him he was so weak that the possibility seemed remote. I had no word of Albert since the time our family was taken away, when Albert was still in Budapest. Perhaps he was still alive. At any rate, Yosel and I clung to each other as though we were brothers.

During the last days before liberation I found my father's second cousin, David Weiss. The family came from Rakosin, the town where I was born. I really never knew him well, having only met him a few times, but he recognized me. He was in better physical condition than me, and Yussel and I stayed close to him. I felt I had a big brother now. I believe he was about Albert or Bumi's age. He now lives in Brooklyn. Two of his brothers also survived.

I owe my life to David. During the last days, I was barely able to stand up. He would pick me up. He made sure we had a safe place to sleep. He held me up when I needed to go to the latrine. It seemed to me that God finally saw me and said, "This kid needs help. I'll send him David." People were dying in great numbers, on the streets and where they slept. Sleeping on the floor, we would rest our heads on one another, and in the morning we would have to push the dead off us. Then one day someone called out that the guards were no longer in the watch towers. They were gone. Someone opened the main gate. There were no guards anywhere. Everyone able to walk went out to the square in front of the gate. David held onto me, but we could not locate Yosel. Suddenly, a jeep with a lone American soldier drove in through the gate. He stood up, held his rifle over his head and was swamped by people who climbed into the jeep and went through his pockets. He stood there with his rifle high, in bewilderment, not making a move to protect himself. I will never forget this scene as long as I live.

The first thing on our minds was food, how and where to find it. We could have waited until help arrived but no one could predict when that would

be, or we could just leave and look for food ourselves. We tried, but couldn't find Yosel. David, leaving me in a safe place, tried to find him but couldn't. So we left. This turned out to be a mistake, for had we stayed we would have received food and medical care. By this time I was very ill. At a later time I was told I probably had typhus. I also learned that the food in the last camp that was thrown to us came from a Red Cross warehouse filled with food. Many of us had died in the crush for the few bits thrown to us while the warehouse was stocked with food that could have fed thousands. But it was never distributed.

The first thing we came upon was a field of newly planted potatoes. There were hundreds there already, digging out the seedlings a German farm woman had planted. She ran back and forth screaming that there was no food in the country and we would all starve. We were already starving. We dug with our hands. David did most of the work. We ate the potatoes raw. My teeth could not bite into them, so we smashed them with a rock and I was able to swallow them.

We walked on again and were approached by a group of American soldiers carrying chemicals in large containers. They asked us to remove our clothes and then sprayed us for lice. We encountered this practice everywhere we went.

As we continued walking along the road, we came upon an agitated crowd of prisoners screaming and yelling excitedly. As David and I approached them we saw a man in civilian clothes tied to a tree. He turned out to be one of the more brutal SS officers from the camp. He yelled denials as his clothes were being torn off, exposing an SS tattoo on his chest. People were filing past him, punching and kicking him. I, wanting to finally take some revenge, punched him with my fist and inflicted more damage to myself than to him.

Kitchens were opened everywhere by the American occupation forces, on crossroads and in farm yards, and we were able to find things to eat.

Since I was still ill and no longer able to see, David found us a place to stay. He washed me and fed me food he got from the kitchens. I can't remember much about this time, but David told me later, when I felt better, that I was delirious most of the time, crying that I couldn't see. We were

told by others that if one was taken to a hospital it would be months before he was released. We wanted to get out of Germany as soon as possible, so hospital care was not an option for me.

David stayed with me until my eyesight came back, that I am sure of. My strength was returning and I started to feel better. But from the time that I became ill to the time when I arrived home, my mind is mostly blank. Many times over the past few years in America I have wanted to ask David about the details of what happened during that time, but I could not bring myself to ask for fear of stirring up memories best forgotten. Even now, as I write about my experiences, I consider calling him, but after some consideration I've decided to limit this account to what I remember.

I was liberated in June, 1945 and did not arrive home until September of that year. I still do not know how I got civilian clothes and a pass for traveling (all displaced persons were given passes to get home), nor do I remember how I managed to change trains and at what point David and I parted. The next time I saw David was here in the U.S. I never thanked you David for what you did for me - perhaps for the same reason I could never really get myself to talk about this period of my life until now - 45 years later.

Unknown to me, Albert was on his way to Luchko, after a trip he made to Romania, having heard rumors that Bumi was there, ill and in a hospital. Albert tried to find him but ran into a dead end. He then boarded the train I was on, but in a different car. We saw each other when we left the train. It was both a happy and a sad reunion. We believed that only the two of us had survived. He later told me that I seemed shorter since the last time he had seen me.

Now I had a big brother again - and I needed one. We stayed in our Uncle Isaac Klein's house which for some reason was unoccupied but some furniture was still there. Carpathia was now part of the Soviet Union. There was talk that the borders to the West would soon be closed. So Albert went to Czechoslovakia, not yet in the Soviet Block, to find us a place to stay.

To leave the country, one needed a permit. There was a deadline approaching, and I had just a few days to get out. Albert was still not

back so I went for the permit and headed for Czechoslovakia. Unknown to me, Albert was on his way back at the same time. After hearing what I had done, he tried to leave and join me, but permits were no longer being issued. With some difficulty, he bribed officials and got out.

I learned from other refugees that he had found a place for us to stay, so I went there and waited until he joined me. The town was Zatec in the Sudeten area. We contacted our family in the United States, and since they would sponsor us we applied for emigration papers in Prague to enter the United States.

While we waited for the papers to be processed, we received a telegram from America - Bumi was alive! He was in Romania, but was able to join us in Czechoslovakia prior to our departure to the United States. We had approximately one week together. It was then that Bumi told me how he had survived. When I had left him at Ebense, his condition worsened and he could no longer carry on. There was in the camp a very small infirmary which house only a dozen patients. It was staffed by prisoners that were doctors in civilian life. They had no medication except for a small amount of aspirin on occasion. To apply for admission to the infirmary was an extreme risk. Having no choice, he applied, was examined, and diagnosed as having tuberculosis. He was admitted and the only thing they could offer him was rest. By the rules he was to have been released after a short time, however, the staff took a liking to him and he was kept on as an orderly in the infirmary and remained there until his release.

Albert and I then left for Paris and onward to the U.S. We arrived in New York June 18, 1946, seven days before my 17th birthday. Bumi left for a Displaced Persons camp in Germany to wait for emigration papers. Instead, he met Esther there, married her, and left for Israel.

Michael Hersh
June, 1990

Afterword

I finally decided to contact David Weiss to see if he could help me fill in the gaps in my memory. To my great disappointment, he too has a memory lapse of the same period. He does recall certain details, however, such as the image of people eating human flesh during the last few days before liberation. At that time he volunteered to dig a mass grave; there were corpses everywhere. In return for the work he was promised food at the end of the day, but he did not receive anything.

On the last day the German guards placed gasoline drums around the camp with the intention of burning down the entire compound. But parachutes suddenly appeared in the the sky, and the guards left their posts and ran.

David feels that everyone would have starved to death within two days had we not been liberated. When I credited him for saving my life, he simply said, "What did I do? I got you some food."